

SEARCHING FOR A HOPOE

Text by THOMAS L. WALLEY Photographs by SEAN C. MALONEY

I've always been something of a naturalist, amateur of course; more into trees and shrubs than birds. But when I heard we were to be assigned to India I became intrigued. I grew up and had always lived in the North Temperate Zone, and the subcontinent was said to be full of exotic flora, not to mention strange birds, bound to be new and exciting. One of the most intriguing to me was the hoopoe, a bird of romance, adventure, and, may I say it, strangeness. The hoopoe (*Upupa epops*) is as large as, maybe, a small crow, with an attractive brown-black-white color scheme, a long, straight beak for nibbling up grubs from the grass and an erect posture like a roadrun-

ner. Plus a crest that opens and closes, opens and closes, kind of like a Japanese folding fan. So I came wanting to find a hoopoe. But where?

Well, the first thing to do is to consider habitat. Now, birds do have some requirements. There must be food, of course. Birds eat a stunning variety of things, depending upon the species, though, so that didn't help much. They need water, naturally, some more than others. There's shelter, both for nesting and for protection, so that means plants of some kind, although some birds have a fondness for rocky cliffs and the walls of old forts. And they need other birds of similar persuasion, for mating.



One of the attractions of India is that, even in the biggest cities, a morning walk can bring encounters with exquisite beauty for those who notice the birds around them.



Above: A purple sunbird at Roosevelt House, the residence of Ambassador David C. Mulford in New Delhi. From far left to right: common hoopoe, Lodhi Gardens; brahminy starling and coppersmith barbet at a park in Malcha Marg.

New Delhi has actually a plethora of places for birds to hang out. There are quite a few parks, some pretty large. There is the Delhi Ridge, which has been left more or less in its natural state, a scrub jungle, some of it well treed with mature specimens. There is the Yamuna River, which, although badly polluted, does host large numbers of birds along its banks and in its stream, especially in the winter. There's the zoo, which has quite an attractive series of water bodies full of both migratory and resident birds. There are the tombs scattered throughout the city. There are lots of roundabouts, small green islands but with food and shelter for some kind of bird. And finally the backyards of

houses with a few shrubs, perhaps a tree, maybe a garden, certainly space for a feeder and a birdbath. So New Delhi actually has lots of opportunities for watching birds.

Take a walk and see if you can find a hoopoe. Go to Lodhi Gardens, starting at the Jor Bagh side, reasonably early some morning when the sky is clear and it's not too hot yet. Go through the gate and walk a few yards. Look off to the right. See the tall trees? Those are prime hornbill territory. I once spent a charming lunch at the Garden Restaurant over there looking up at a family of three Indian gray hornbills learning to fly, frolicking about in the upper branches. Now gaze left. There are several

thick clumps of bamboo dotted here and there. Look at the ground. Hear that scurrying, chirping sound over there? Jungle babblers, keeping in touch while busily snacking. They never stay quiet, giving them the name of Seven Brothers (*Saat Bhai* in Hindi), which is pretty apt. Look a little higher now. The middle reaches of the bamboo will very likely have several bulbuls, both red-vented and red-whiskered, flitting from branch to branch and calling to each other. There are probably also house sparrows, the same homely little brown bird we see around Washington, D.C., or London. With any luck, we might see a tree hiding a spotted owlet or three.

Walk a little farther now and the area will open up to a lawn, dotted with shrubs. There are mynas, both common and brahminy, hopping around on the ground, strutting as they walk a few paces to search for more food, perhaps some trash. The shrubs are prime spotting areas for tailor-birds, small, green and brown fellows with straight beaks they use for sewing their nests, and white-eyes, another leaf-colored bird with a white circle around its eye, both smaller than house sparrows. You have to look close to see either one of these guys. Look at the tomb there ahead. Chances are pretty good you will see a rose-ringed parakeet sitting on the wall, or flying hastily here and there with a loud screech. He is green, with a rose-colored ring around his neck and a bright red beak. If you see him silhouetted against a wall, his tail may look a little blue—that's because it is. You will also almost certainly see blue rock pigeons around; you've probably seen some every time you have been out, winter or summer, rain or shine.



Seasoned birdwatchers or casual strollers always have a good chance of spotting rose-ringed parakeets in a tree trunk.

Rose-ringed parakeets, female in the nest, the male outside, U.S.

Embassy housing compound, New Delhi.



It's no secret that India's variety of bird species, estimated at 1,300—including seasonal visitors from Africa, Siberia and Northern Europe—are among the attractions that bring bird lovers from around the world to tour India's national parks and wildlife reserves. What most of those foreign tourists—and perhaps most Indians—don't know, is that Indian cities are uniquely

in the sky. For an American city dweller, spotting one of these stately and fierce-eyed birds calmly lapping up water leaked from a hose in a pocket park next to the honking bustle of an Indian city street is a moment of wonder, never forgotten.

But there are plenty of Indians in on the fun, too. Bird watching clubs, whose members stroll out in the early morning with their

shares a huge gallery of bird portraits by local photographers, amateur and professional, and provides tips on the best places to spot the 250 bird species that share the city with 12 million people. The Tollygunge Golf Club greens are a prime location, as are ponds at Eden Gardens and Jodhpur Park and the marshy land at Salt Lake. On the India Hotspots site ([On the Mumbai Pages Web site \(<http://theory.tifr.res.in/bombay/>\) Sourendu Gupta, a theoretical physicist at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, a prime bird-spotting site, shares this poetic description of sunbirds he has often seen in the midst of India's largest city: "These small glittering birds, most commonly a shimmering dark green or blue, are sometimes mistaken for hummingbirds because of the way they hover before flowers." When he is not investigating quark matter or the temperature of the universe at its birth, Gupta says, "It's relaxing for me to get out sometimes, once a year, to watch birds. I'm no expert. I usually go with a group. We are just people from Bombay who like to do this, amateur bird-watchers."](http://www.camac-</p>
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<http://www.kolkatabirds.com>

Birds of Kolkata



blessed with an everyday display, in roadside bushes and trees, of interesting and beautiful birds that may be seen only in zoos in other countries. In the United States, one may grow up never seeing a kite closer than the distance of a soaring speck

eyes in the trees; on-line chat groups that exchange bird-sighting reports; and photographers who share their snaps of birds can be found in many of India's large cities.

The Birds of Kolkata Web site (<http://www.kolkatabirds.com>)

donald.com/birding/asiaindia.html) there are photos, maps, bird-sighting reports and links to books and government references, plus connections to chat groups such as Bangalore Birds (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bng-birds/>).

And some doves, either collared or little brown. Watch out for your hat—just about here my wife was dive-bombed by a protective crow when she got too close to the nest. The house crow is large for a crow, aggressive, noisy and very persistent. And practically omnivorous.

Look a little higher. You can almost certainly spot a pariah kite sailing in the middle air, his V-shaped tail either held wide or held close, his wings a little splayed at the tips as he controls his glide.

Off to the left is an open grove of trees, just right for mid-height birds. With any luck, you might see a really spectacular

sight, a golden-backed woodpecker climbing up a tree trunk, tap-tapping for insects under the bark, then sailing off to start on the next tree. Or maybe a Mahratta woodpecker, smaller, outfitted in black and white feathers except for the brilliant red topknot. Listen as you walk, and you may hear the tonk-tonk-tonk of the coppersmith barbet as he does his imitation of a tin-smith busily hammering away. I once counted and got 10 tonks in six seconds. Then there is his cousin, the green barbet, who isn't all that green since he has a large brown head with the brown extending about halfway to his tail; he does a loud, persistently repeated two-note call, ku-troo, ku-troo. Did you know that birds don't have to inhale to make a call? They have

a kind of continuous flow of air, in and out, or maybe "through" would express it better, since *we* go in and out.

With any luck we could see some painted storks or maybe white pelicans way high, flying to the zoo, which isn't far away. Or maybe some wagtails strutting about along the banks near the water, bobbing their tails up and down. Or if we can find some red salvia flowers, we might see a purple sunbird in mating plumage, quite a sight, iridescent. But I haven't yet found a hoopoe. □

About the Author and Photographer: Thomas L. Walley and Sean C. Maloney are Communications Officers at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi.

Far left: A pair of spotted owlets, U.S. Embassy compound, New Delhi. Left: Oriental magpie robin, park in Malcha Marg, New Delhi.

